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Some reflections on the ‘problematic’ dominance of ‘Web of Science’ journals in academic human geography

Abstract

This Observation discusses two problematic features of some of the most commonly voiced critiques against the ‘Web of Science’ (WoS) in academic human geography. First, most critical appraisals of the WoS tend to understate the diversity of the human geography research indexed in this database. Second, the portraying of academic geographers as innocent victims in this context conveniently disguises their own complicity.

In a recent contribution to this journal, Schuermans et al. (2010) highlight the tendency of Belgian human geographers to publish in English language journals listed in the ‘Web of Science’ (WoS). The merit of their paper and a number of other recent contributions on this topic can undoubtedly be traced back to the authors’ rigorous empirical framework (see also Paasi, 2005): rather than merely assuming that publication practices have in recent years shifted towards WoS journals, their longitudinal analysis of the publication output of academic geographers provides hard evidence for this shift.

It is clear that most contributions highlighting the increased/increasing WoS dominance in the publication strategies of human geographers assume that this is a problematic trend. Although the debate on the problems associated with a WoS-dominated publication landscape is wide-ranging and variegated, it seems fair to state that the most commonly addressed themes – as

far as the field of academic human geography is concerned – are related with ‘language’ and ‘diversity’ (see, for instance, Garcia-Ramon, 2003; Kitchin, 2005).

The debate on language boils down to the observation that most WoS journals only/mainly publish papers in English (Gutiérrez and López-Nieva, 2001). The increased orientation towards WoS journals thus further strengthens the position of English as the de facto *lingua franca* for geographical research. The potential problems associated with this hegemonic position of English in the production, reproduction and circulation of knowledge are multifaceted, and range from the ‘creative destruction’ of papers because of enforced language edits (Kitchin and Fuller, 2003) to the cold hard fact that language editing costs time and/or money (Aalbers, 2004).

The debate on diversity, in turn, revolves around topical and methodological biases in the WoS coverage of journals so that, according to Schuermans et al. (2010, 7), a “one-sided focus on Web of Science publications (...) might lead to the neglect of some geographical subdisciplines.” Staeheli (2006, 198-199), for instance, claims there is “a bias against urban, feminist, and critical theory journals,” while others argue that – over and above a favoring of the English language – the dominance of WoS journals (re)produces a power-knowledge system that keeps debates internal to the Anglo-American geographical community, where ‘Others’ are only welcome insofar they are able and willing to articulate themselves within its dominant discourses (e.g. Simonsen, 2002).

Some observers, however, have challenged this overall negative appraisal. For instance, with respect to language, Rodríguez-Pose (2004, 2) – a non-native English speaker himself – states that “the advantages of having a *lingua franca* far outweigh its drawbacks, making any attempt to combat the expansion of English in science both futile and counterproductive.” And as to the increasing ‘Anglo-American’ domination, Rodríguez-Pose (2006, 603) is even more damning by arguing that most of the assertions on which this position is built “are

simply grounded on nothing more than the perceptions of individual authors.” In this Observation, my aim is to extend these comments by critically examining two further problematic assumptions in commonly voiced critiques against WoS journals in the context of academic human geography.

First, most critical appraisals tend to understate the diversity of the human geography research indexed in the WoS database. By referring to the ‘heartland of academic geography’ (Schuermans et al., 2010) or ‘the Anglo-American academic empire’ (Minca, 2000), critics often assume what they set out to establish. Apart from the fact that there is no such thing as a coherent ‘Anglo-American’ academic geography (Johnston and Sidaway, 2004), assessments of the publication records and curricula of (young) academics outside this fuzzy ‘heartland’ or ‘empire’ still reveal complex and multifaceted patterns in which WoS journals are but one of many engagements (Aalbers and Rossi, 2007; Rossi, 2008). ‘Anglo-American human geography’ is merely a discursive assortment of very different research traditions that can hardly be called a ‘heartland’, let alone an ‘empire’.

Furthermore, equating WoS journals with ‘Anglo-American journals’ is increasingly incorrect. Although the WoS is indeed still biased towards such journals, the situation today is much less uneven than a decade ago as described by Gutiérrez & López-Nieva (2001): a large number of recent additions come from outside the supposed heartland, e.g. *Geografiska Annaler B* (Sweden), *Geografische Zeitschrift* (Germany), *EURE* (Chile), *Mitteilungen der Österreichischen Geographischen Gesellschaft* (Austria), *South African Geographical Journal* (South Africa), etc. Moreover, the dominance of the English language is thereby also being challenged. For instance, the *Journal of Latin American Urban and Regional Studies* (*EURE*) does publish papers in English, but authors must arrange for the translation into Spanish or Portuguese. Additionally, publishing papers in English does not by definition

herald a journal's 'surrender' to the 'requirements' of 'Anglo-American research'. The Dutch *TESG* journal, for instance, still publishes its well-known 'Window on the Netherlands' and 'Outlook on Europe', thus showing a continued deep engagement with its geographical roots. And finally, Staeheli's (2006) unsubstantiated claim that WoS coverage is biased against feminist and critical theory journals sounds rather bizarre in the face of the high WoS impact factors of flagship radical journals such as *Antipode* and *Gender, Place & Culture*.

The second issue I want to raise relates to the tendency in WoS critiques to portray academic geographers as innocent victims of outside trends imposed upon them. Schuermans et al. (2010, my emphasis), for instance, state "that the changing publication practices of Belgian geographers cannot be understood without referring to the *external* demands facing them." However, despite the sometimes radical rhetoric on this topic, most academic human geographers have in their professional practice simply endorsed the WoS, making it difficult to frame this as 'an external demand'. For instance, in my view, Schuermans et al. (2010) are partly wrong in their assessment that the struggle to survive for so many local journals has to be connected with the rising pressure to publish in WoS journals: I see no evidence of a straightforward trade-off between both types of outlets whereby the WoS journals are 'winning' because of changing funding/institutional/academic/peer demands (see Aalbers & Rossi, 2007). As noted above, 'national' journals from outside the supposed 'heartland' are increasingly making their way to the WoS, and this is above all a reflection of their *actual* quality. In the particular example discussed by Schuermans et al. (2010), *Belgeo*'s struggle to survive has little to do with being a simple victim of geography: the journal has no promotional strategy or a clearly stated purpose, and is largely an eclectic mixture of unrelated contributions with a vague 'geographical' focus. In sum: although probably fuelled by the changing meritocratic landscape, the WoS turn of many scholars can also be explained

by the sorry state of ‘local’ geography journals. It is, of course, very difficult to separate chicken from egg, but leaving this ‘other side’ out of the discussion may well distort our assessment of what is going on.

To end, I want to emphasize that I am most certainly not denying that the increased adoption of the WoS may be problematic: this database is definitely geographically biased (e.g. new additions from outside the UK/US are nonetheless still mainly from ‘the core’), and there is indeed a danger of research being disciplined in unwanted directions. Furthermore, it is also true that ‘outside pressures’ fuel this trend. However, it seems to me that some critiques are based on overly simplistic assumptions. First, there are indeed all sorts of biases in the WoS, but in recent years there has been a tendency towards a more diverse and multi-tiered coverage. Second, framing the rise of WoS journals as a response to ‘external’ trends puts ‘the blame’ squarely with a set of poorly specified actors (‘research agencies’, ‘benchmarking committees’, ‘neo-liberal capitalism in academia’,...), thus conveniently disguising the complicity of all of us. It is interesting to note that numerous publications on this topic are published in WoS journals, which suggests that we have reached the paradoxical point where one can build an academic career in human geography based on WoS publications dealing with the problematic WoS publication practices of human geographers for the discipline at large.

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